

# Political Reservation and Women's Empowerment: A Case Study of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Sikkim

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## Abstract

Within India's democratic discourse, empowering women through participation in governance and decision-making has been a main concern of the decentralisation frameworks. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) has proven to be a landmark in this context by reserving one-third (33%) of all seats for women. Since then, it has been discussed and seen as a policy measure and an unprecedented opportunity for gender inclusion at the grassroots level. While in Sikkim, a small Himalayan state with a distinct socio-cultural and historical background, it has taken a significant step by reserving 50% of PRI seats for women in the state. This paper, through a qualitative and descriptive study, examines how reservations have contributed to women's participation, thereby enhancing their empowerment and rural development and governance. The study reveals that increased women's participation in PRIs, due to reservations, not only empowers them but also instils leadership qualities and contributes both instrumentally and symbolically to the socio-political and economic development of the community.

**Keywords:** women, empowerment, Panchayati raj, Sikkim, reservation, local governance

## Introduction

Women, despite constituting a significant proportion of India's total population, have historically remained relatively marginal in their participation in governance and decision making. The gap between the constitutional and actual political position of women in India continues to challenge democratic values. Recognising this imbalance, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 marked a paradigm shift in establishing democratic decentralisation through PRIs with 33% reservation for women. This has transformed rural women from "passive beneficiaries" of development into "active agents" in local self-government.

Sikkim, a small Himalayan state, has been an exemplary of strengthening gender inclusion and participation in governance and decision-making in grassroots politics. Through successive amendments, the state has increased the quota for women in PRIs to 50%. This not only expanded political opportunity for women in PRIs but also, along with other initiatives, effectively redefined leadership roles and governance across rural Sikkim.

The present study, employing a qualitative and descriptive approach, investigates the extent to which reservations for women in PRIs have translated into increased participation and empowerment of women in the state of Sikkim. It also assesses how elected women representatives perceive their roles in rural governance, and contribute to development and decision-making.

## **PRIs in India: A Brief History**

The Panchayati Raj Institution in India has been a crucial constitutional framework for democratic decentralisation. The concept of Panchayat has deep historical roots, dating back to ancient Indian traditions including the Vedas, the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, the Manusmriti, Kautilya's Arthashastra, and Buddhist and Jain literatures (Bhatnagar, 1978). The word 'Panchayat' comprises two Sanskrit root words: pancha, i.e. five, and ayat, meaning assembly, and together it signifies an assembly (ayat) of five (panch) village elders entrusted with maintaining and responsible for upholding justice, resolving disputes, and managing and overseeing religious and social matters.

Panchayati Raj Institution in India is not a sudden phenomenon, but rather an evolutionary one. Indian villages had Panchayats from very ancient times, and the village heads (council of five members) used to handle various issues arising in the village area. The institution of self-governance is an understanding and action of Mahatma Gandhi, who visualised the idea of 'Gram Swaraj'. His main vision was decentralisation of power to uplift the common citizens at the village or grassroots level. Following India's independence in 1947, the Constituent Assembly sought to uphold Gandhi's idea of Gram Swaraj by empowering states to create village panchayats. This intent was incorporated into Article 40 of the Constitution, although it did not specify how these bodies should be structured or administered (Singh, 1994). Over time, the Panchayati Raj system took shape through several committees formed to strengthen decentralised democracy and local governance. The recommendations of these committees were subsequently accentuated through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, which provided constitutional recognition to Panchayat and mandated one-third reservation for women at all levels (Chandel, 2001). The Panchayati Raj Institution has since then emerged as an important political platform for women's active participation in decision makings.

## **Women and The PRIs**

In the past, women, despite constituting half of society, were often relegated to a secondary position vis-à-vis to man. The potential of woman had been largely unrecognised, and their contributions had often been overlooked. More importantly, the political rights were completely absent. Slowly, the involvement of women in politics was seen in democratic states after the introduction of the universal adult franchise. Over the past few decades, political initiatives, social reform efforts, and feminist movements since the 1960s have effectively highlighted women's issues within academic and policy circles (Kumari, 1992)

The concept of empowering women through participation emerged in mainstream discourse in the 1990s. The active involvement of women in politics is recognised as essential for their empowerment, as women are better equipped to understand and address the various problems that affect them. It was realised that political participation allows women to contribute to social development while challenging oppression and the norms that limit them to the household. They also provide a symbolic inspiration for other women to engage in decision-making. Women therefore considered not only beneficiaries of change, but they are also key agents of change (Behera, 2011).

Although women have been granted a universal adult franchise to overcome the constraints on their participation in the political field, despite their numerical strength, women are still underrepresented in occupying political positions and holding power. Therefore, the quota for women has been viewed as a possible outcome to overcome the difficulties and empower them. This implies their engagement in politics, starting with voting and extending to holding public office, which enables them to influence policymaking (Panda, 1999).

Various countries, including India, are thus encouraging an increase in the number of female representatives through the means of reserved seats. The 73rd Amendment Act, 1992, granted 1/3rd (33%) reservation of seats to women in PRIs.

### **PRIs in Sikkim: A Brief History**

Before the state of Sikkim merged with India, it had maintained traditional local bodies, such as Chhodu, Illaka, and Dzumsa, which operated as non-statutory panchayats for centuries (Chhetri, 2008). The Panchayati Raj System in Sikkim is not of recent origin, but its emergence can be traced back to the Sikkim Durbar Act of 1965. This Act prescribed a non-hierarchical structure for Panchayats, placing the Block Panchayat at the village level (Thapa, 2019). Each Block Panchayat comprised five elected members serving a three-year term, while the position of village head (mondal) was filled through appointment. Under the Durbar Act, four elections were held in 1966, 1969, 1972 and 1976 (Chhetri, 2008). During these elections, only those persons who had paid land revenue tax and house tax were eligible to vote or contest. There was a complete absence of universal adult franchise, a main provision of any democratic state. After several years, the Sikkim Panchayat Act, 1982, was introduced, replacing the Sikkim Durbar Act, 1965 (Dutta, 2005).

The Sikkim Panchayat Act, 1982, introduced a two-tier local government system, comprising Gram Panchayats (GPs) at the village level and Zilla Panchayats (ZPs) at the district level (Chhetri, 2008). A key feature of this legislation was the introduction of the universal adult franchise based on direct and regular elections, along with reserved seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women. The primary objective of the 1982 Act was to enable full participation by its citizens in the state's local affairs. This framework remained in force until 1993, when it was replaced following the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act.

### **Women and PRIs in Sikkim**

In response to the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, Sikkim adopted the Sikkim Panchayat Act, 1993, which introduced a 33% reservation for women in local governance institutions (Sikkim Government Gazette, 1993). This commitment to women's political inclusion was strengthened in 2005 through an amendment requiring that "one-third of the quorum shall comprise women" for a meeting in the Gram and Ward Sabha (Sikkim Government Gazette, 28 Nov 2005). The quota was subsequently increased to 40% in 2007 and later to 50% through the Sikkim Panchayat Amendment Act of 2011. This progression has been viewed as a positive trend towards expanding women's political representation and empowering them at the grassroots level.

## **A Brief Outline on the Status of Women in Sikkim**

Diyali (2008) observed that women in Sikkim enjoy a relatively better status and social mobility compared to many parts of India. Government jobs held by women in Sikkim are also notably higher in comparison to those held by men. Even in the field of education, the state shows a positive status. According to the 2011 Census, the literacy rate for females is 76.43%, a substantial increase from the 2001 Census, when it was 60.41%. However, the idea of the 'empowerment of women' stands as a relatively new phenomenon. Back in the Monarchy, they faced significant societal constraints and were limited to domestic roles, denied property rights. Even today, inheritance rights to women are limited and conditioned; a married woman cannot claim parental property, while an unmarried daughter is only entitled to a limited share. In 1962, a regulation known as the Married Women's Property Regulation was passed by the Maharaja of Sikkim, which was subsequently extended throughout the territory of Sikkim. According to the said regulation, if a woman marries a man who is not a Sikkimese, her husband and children have no ownership of property on which she may hold a title. Although the state of Sikkim was merged with India as its 22nd state in 1975, the law did not take effect

Nonetheless, in the post-merger decades, particularly the late 1990s, the state witnessed a series of proactive initiatives aimed at women's empowerment. The government introduced various welfare schemes to uplift women at the grassroots level. For instance, the "Small Family Scheme" encourages women to delay early marriage and continue with their studies. The Scheme provides an incentive of Rs 2,000 if she marries after the completion of 21 years, an additional incentive of Rs 500 if she marries at the age of 22, and if she marries at the age of 23, an additional incentive of Rs 1,000 is paid to her. So far, this scheme has covered over 1,200 children (Lama, 2001). Over the years, both the Central and the State governments have introduced a number of Programmes, such as Mahila Samriddhi Yojana, Balika Samriddhi Yojana, and Small Family Scheme and other women-specific welfare and empowerment programmes to promote women's welfare and their empowerment.

## **Empowering Women through Panchayati Raj: Method and Field Reflections from Sikkim**

### **Method and Material**

The study aims to investigate the impact of reserving seats for women in the Panchayat system in Sikkim on their empowerment across social, economic, and political spheres. It also assesses the developments they have brought to their concerned area and the challenges they have encountered throughout the entire process.

The study is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted across four Gram Panchayats and one Zilla Parishad from the North and South districts between March 2021 to April 2021. A total of 32 women panchayat members were interviewed. For a detailed analysis, socio-economic and political variables such as age, education, marital status, family political affiliation, and the political experience of the women members have been taken into account. These variables have also been used in the study to develop an understanding of the participation of women members in the PRIs in Sikkim.

## **Field Reflections and Findings**

### **The study came across the following findings:**

Firstly, the interview revealed that middle-aged women members, who belong to the 36-45 age group, showed a great deal of interest and enthusiasm in being part of the political process. This age group is relatively free from societal constraints and appears to be more aware of their rights. They were highly interested in the affairs of Panchayati Raj Institutions and were seen taking full advantage of the 50% reservation allotted to them by the Sikkim Government.

Secondly, in terms of their educational qualification, it was learnt from the interviews that it varied significantly among respondents. Many discontinued their studies after Class 10 due to early marriage or domestic responsibilities. Women who have pursued higher education are employed in government services. Out of 32 respondents, 6 are graduates, and 2 are post-graduates, reflecting a positive trend. One notable anecdote found in the field reflects how, despite low education, a present Zilla Panchayat member in Mangan Zilla Panchayat journeyed from a Gram panchayat to a second-time Zilla Panchayat member. She shared that she had studied only up to Class 3, and as a widow and mother, she first entered politics in 2012 as a Gram Panchayat member of Kabi Rongpa GPU. Despite her limited education, she managed to gain public support and went on to serve a second term in the Zilla Panchayat. Although initially, when she started her term, she faced difficulty in understanding and handling the affairs of the local administration, over time, she gained experience, and now she is serving for the second time as a Zilla Panchayat member. She understands the problems of the people and tries her best to satisfy them despite being less educated.

Thirdly, the study found that most of the respondents were married, and their participation in politics was not hindered by marital responsibilities. On the contrary, it was shared that they have been fully supported by their husbands and families. In fact, during the interview, it was learnt that some women members have been encouraged by their husbands as they were active in politics. Though they face difficulty in managing their household work as well as office work, they try to maintain a balance between the two. In the case of unmarried women, when asked, it has been found that they are not encouraged much to enter politics. They were pursuing higher education. Also, most of the young women are either working as government employees or are engaged in other activities.

Fourthly, it was found that the political affiliation of the family also plays a role in the participation of women leaders in the Panchayat system. During the interview, a crucial observation was made regarding women representatives that they did not come from a family with a political background, and initially, they faced difficulty navigating the political structure and functioning. However, they gradually learned to handle it and also gained good experience over the years. On the other hand, women members whose families were politically affiliated benefited greatly as they found it easy to garner support from the public. Because of their political background, these women easily got the party tickets. For instance, a respondent who is currently a panchayat member of Geyzing Zilla Panchayat, West Sikkim, reported that her father-in-law was the Land Reform Minister from 1994 to 2010. So, she has been motivated by her father-in-law to contest the panchayat election. Her sister is an MLA in Gangtok, and



her own cousins are also actively involved in politics. All this created a political atmosphere in her family, which instilled political ambitions in her. Since she comes from a political family background, she has already received respect and status from the public. During her tenure, she implemented many development and welfare initiatives, including the distribution of household items, the construction of children's parks, toilets and installing water tanks to address scarcity. Under her leadership, she and the other members of Geyzing Zilla Panchayat participated in different competition programmes in Singapore, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, and Singapore, where they bagged the first prize and brought back Rs. 50,000 from each place, which she invested the prize money for the development works in the villages.

Lastly, in terms of the political experience of women panchayat members, it was found that half of the respondents had contested Panchayat elections for the first time, and largely got the opportunity through 50% reservation. From the interviews, it was found that most of the women members who had contested the elections for the first time gained experience in the Panchayati Raj to connect with the local people. It also brought a huge and positive impact on them, as it instilled confidence in them. In the past, they were just confined to the four walls, engaging themselves in household activities. They felt shy interacting with the people and government officials. They faced difficulties whenever they went to do some official work. But now, because of the 50% reservation that has been allotted to them, they can equally get representation in politics, their voices are heard, and they do not feel shy anymore to speak in front of the public.

Most of the women who contested the election for the second time were encouraged by the public to do so. It is learnt that the public were really satisfied with their work, and the women members were also successful in winning the hearts of the people of the concerned villages. One respondent, serving her third term as Vice-President of Maniram Phalidara GPU, was found to be a model of sustained grassroots leadership. Over fifteen years of her career in local politics, she has organised many awareness programs on health, domestic violence, drug abuse, human trafficking, and initiated computer literacy programs to educate villagers about government schemes. She has also conducted some public speaking training sessions for women to help them gain confidence in raising their voices and concerns in public. She shared that in her panchayat areas, she conducts gram sabha or public meetings bi-monthly to receive public opinion and learn about their problems. She shared that during her tenure, most of the minor disputes were resolved at the local level without escalating to courts. Under her leadership, it was learnt that Maniram Phalidara GPU won five national awards for excellence and has also become a training centre for Panchayat members from across Sikkim.

### **Beyond Participation: Empowering Women through Grass-Root Initiatives**

While conducting the fieldwork, the central question asked respondents was whether the elected women leaders had been able to develop and improve the condition of rural women. The responses revealed that these leaders are not only active participants but also key agents of change and improvement of the condition of women within their communities.

It was learnt from the respondents that the respective Panchayat Department directs them to organise various programmes and initiatives to engage rural women in different activities that

promote social awareness, economic independence and overall empowerment. For instance, women in the villages are given different types of awareness programmes on pressing social issues, such as drugs, human trafficking, child protection, tobacco, sanitation, etc. Women in the villages are also provided with various skill development and livelihood training programmes, including noodle making, mushroom cultivation, bouquet making, pickle making, tailoring, driving, handlooms, food processing, and basket making. These efforts together promote economic self-reliance and are also metaphorically doing away with the strict traditional gender roles. Special attention is also paid to vulnerable groups; unmarried women and women above the age of 45 are provided with a pension to ensure basic social security. Various speech and public speaking training programmes are also given to the rural women so that they can raise their voices regarding their issues. The Panchayat have also undertaken initiatives to enhance education and digital literacy. Computer trainings are provided to the women in the villages, and young girls who are unable to study and attend school are also encouraged to resume their education. To encourage education, they have also constructed separate washrooms for girls and boys in schools. Free tuition and coaching classes have also been provided to children in the villages.

However, despite these positive developments, the members frequently highlight insufficient and inadequate funds to meet the set objectives towards women in particular.

## **Conclusion**

As Mohanty (2005) describes the PRIs in India as the beginning of a “silent revolution,” which has brought millions of women into active politics and governance at the grassroots level. This has expanded their social and political spaces both within and beyond the domestic spheres. The 33% reservation marked a significant step towards political participation and empowerment of women. This not only challenged the entrenched patriarchal structure but also empowered women with leadership qualities by providing them a platform to transform themselves from beneficiaries to “agents” of development. In the context of Sikkim, this study reaffirms this observation. The introduction of 50% reservation for women in PRIs has significantly strengthened their political participation. It has qualified a substantial female population, primarily married women, who contest and hold elected positions. These women are constantly encouraged and supported by their family members and the local commune. Women representatives are mostly informed about the necessary provisions under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. They regularly participate in decision-making processes, conduct Gram Sabhas and other meetings. Their increasing and active participants reflect a growing confidence and competence in public engagements. Once elected, women members undergo governance and administrative training programmes at Karfector (South Sikkim) and Assam Lingzey (East Sikkim). However, most meetings, trainings, and other programmes are conducted online, which is not as helpful as offline ones where participants receive practical training.

A notable observation is that many women members were uncontested, which is a sign of growing social acceptance and public trust. Several of them had prior involvement in social work before joining politics, and mostly got their credibility and public visibility from their prior engagements. Over time, their experiences in PRIs have helped them build strong public

speaking and leadership skills. Panchayati Raj has thus helped women to break the walls of their homes and come out in the front, share their innovative ideas and have a voice in the society, bring developments and work for the betterment of the people.

Despite limited or insufficient funds, these women leaders have led exceptionally. They have actively promoted women's empowerment initiatives, including awareness programmes on social issues, livelihood training, and the formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and so on. Such initiatives have helped significantly to achieve economic independence, self-confidence, and communication skills of rural women. Although women in the villages do not turn up every time in the meetings, trainings and other programmes, the women leaders always try to persuade them to take part in these activities.

The Panchayati Raj, with a 50% reservation policy for women, has indeed opened various opportunities for women in Sikkim to enter the political arena, build confidence, assume power and understand the workings of the government. Their engagement in active politics and governance has not only been instrumental and symbolic in women's empowerment but has also significantly contributed to the development of their society as a whole.

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